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ABSTRACT

Developing a curriculum is a task that is often discounted in many school corporations during the course of selecting new textbooks. Most school corporations simply adopt a publisher's text and design a curriculum around it. This paper describes some fundamental elements of an effective public-relations program and ways in which the elements can positively affect curriculum decisions. The paper discusses how internal publics (administrators, teachers, and support staff) and external publics (parents, taxpayers, civic leaders, and business leaders) can be used to design a curriculum that reflects student and community interests, to offer specific measurable learning outcomes, and to provide specific instructional strategies to meet these outcomes. Finally, the paper highlights elements of two Indiana elementary schools' successful public-relations programs to illustrate the roles that internal and external publics play in the curriculum process. Public-relations tactics for dealing with special-interest groups are also discussed. One table is included. (Contains 10 references.) (LMI)

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Running head: CURRICULUM AND PUBLIC RELATIONS

# Establishing Curriculums through Effective Public Relations

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Abstract

Establishing a curriculum is an enormous task that is often discounted during the course of adopting new student texts in many school corporations. While one would hope that school corporations adopted a curriculum prior to selecting a text, the reality is that most school corporations adopt a publisher's text and consequently design a curriculum around the adopted text. The result is a curriculum that reflects the publishers scope and sequence of the text, but is void of specific learning outcomes, instructional strategies needed to meet outcomes, and most unfortunate is the void of student interest and choice. This paper seeks to offer some basic fundamental elements of an effective public relations programs, and the ability of such elements to positively influence curriculum decisions. It will further demonstrate how internal (e.g. administrators, teachers, aides, support staff) and external publics (e.g. parents, taxpayers, civic leaders, business leaders) can be utilized to design a curriculum that is reflective of student and community interests, offer specific measurable learning outcomes, and provide specific instructional strategies to meet these outcomes. Finally, a review of two successful public relations programs will show the roles that internal and external publics play in the curriculum process and will discuss public relations tactics designed to deal with special interest groups that often thwart the methodology of curriculum reform.

Defining the Role of Public Relations in Curriculum Development

"Education needs thick-skinned leaders who can make these tough decisions, face criticisms, accept suggestions and most of all defend with pride and conviction, the public education program. But, we must always be striving for improvement and seeking alternative solutions to our dilemmas." (Gifford, 1989)

Such sentiments as Craig Gifford's reflect the stark realization by many educational leaders who find themselves lunged into the limelight of negative public opinion towards public education, and specifically a school's curriculum. School corporations continue to come under attack from parent action committees, concerned citizenry groups, and a variety of special interest groups that seek to either add to a school's curriculum or stifle the recommended approval of a proposed curriculum.

To combat growing criticisms, particularly those that are directed at a school's approved curriculum, many school corporations are turning towards the development of effective public relations programs. Many of these programs are extensive in nature, expending thousands of dollars on personnel, media advertisements, and written publications to keep both external and internal publics knowledgeable of corporation activities.

Donald Bagin (1994) in his book, The School and Community Relations, states that, "An administrator may provide excellent leadership for the school's curriculum and he or she may be a financial wizard; but if that administrator cannot communicate with the school board, a concerned taxpayer's group, or the staff, days in the district will be few." Never has such a statement been more true. In a period of increasing public skepticism regarding the quality of a school's curriculum, administrators find themselves having to rethink the traditional approach to developing curriculum committees, facilitating textbook adoptions, and

justifying to the general public and school board members a particular curriculum program. The expertise of educators is no longer a sole validation for the adoption and implementation of a curriculum. In our nation, there is presently a loud outcry for accountability that will compel administrators to develop uniform curriculums throughout a school district. These curriculums will be the devised product of not only teachers and administrators, but parents, business leaders, concerned community members, and even special interest groups. Consequently, administrators will become facilitators responsible for the successful mapping of a curriculum that "is based on the concepts that (a) the quantity of time teachers allocate to a task has an effect on students' achievement, and (b) curriculum decisions need to be based on facts, not on opinions, pressure or expedience." (Weinstein, 1986)

By utilizing a number of effective public relations tactics, administrators can accomplish the seemingly impossible task of developing new curriculums that are reflective of numerous public opinions, and yet provide the best possible education for the students of a school district.

## Components of a Successful Public Relations Program

In a recent video documentary, "A Comparative Analysis of Two Successful Schools: Amy Beverland and Stony Creek Elementary Schools", Ball State University students, Teresa Finkbine and Brad Oliver, reviewed the public relations programs of two schools recognized for excellence in the state of Indiana. Through interviews with administrators, a review of each school's public relations written policy, and through direct observation from within the schools, Finkbine and Oliver identified a number of critical components to an effective public relations program. The table on the next page displays which components were displayed in either one or both of these two elementary schools:

Table 1

Components of an Effective Public Relations Program:

(a) The school corporation has adopted a written public relations policy.

(b) The superintendent of the school corporation believes in the importance of a public relations program.

(c) The school corporation has employed a specific individual to be responsible for communicating with the public.

(d) The school corporation communicates frequently and utilizes a variety of mediums.

(e) Individual schools within the corporation "market" themselves to their respective publics.

(f) Principals of individual schools are held responsible for the implementation of all public relations tactics that involve their school.

(g) Individual schools network with key communicators in the community (i.e. business leaders, clergy, civic leaders, parents, etc.)

(h) Individual schools make concentrated efforts to bring both parent and non-parent citizens into the school building.

(i) The school corporation utilizes community advisory councils that make recommendations to the school board regarding school policy.

(j) The public relations program is continuously evaluated for effectiveness.

It should be noted, that specific budgetary allocations were not a consideration in evaluating the effectiveness of the public relations program. While both school corporations incur specific expenditures related to the implementation of their public relations program, specific allocations are not made for each school. Robert Harvey, principal of Stony Creek Elementary School in Noblesville, Indiana states that "while there are no budgetary allocations made for this [public relations] purpose, it does not limit the school from communicating with these publics."

(R.D. Harvey, personal interview, February 1996) Harvey's remarks are reflective of the proactive attitude needed to maintain effective relationships with internal and external publics. Finkbine and Oliver (1996) concluded that "the success of these schools is a direct result of a carefully articulated and implemented public relations program that combines staff, students, parents, and non-parent citizenry in a consorted approach for the purpose of building a quality elementary school."

Having defined for the reader those components of an effective public relations program, the remainder of this paper will focus on how a school can facilitate curriculum development through effective public relations.

## The Marriage of Curriculum Development and Public Relations

Curriculum development has been traditionally upheld as one of the single most important tasks that a school corporation undertakes. Individual states have passed legislation that establishes guidelines for school corporations regarding the adoption of new student texts and the adoption of new curriculum programs. Increasingly, more states are allowing the decision making process to occur at the local level. However, it is important to note that while decisions are being made by local boards of education, many states still mandate specific adoption requirements. One of these requirements pertains to the percentage of non-education professionals that comprise a curriculum committee for a school corporation. In the state of Indiana, state legislators have required school corporations to assemble curriculum committees, whereby parent and non-parent citizenry comprise forty percent of the entire committee.

In addition to state mandates, educational reforms are being levied at the national level. National Education Goals 2000 is very specific in its attempt to increase parental involvement. Apart from this, there is also a growing inclination for national curriculum standards to be assessed at the local level. While the

Federal Courts have upheld that education is not a constitutional right, curriculum reform is being promulgated at the national level.

Carole L. Perlman, of Chicago Public Schools, participated in a symposium, "How Will the National Curriculum Standards be Measured at the National, State, and Local Levels?", at the annual meeting of the National Council of Measurement in Education and the American Educational Research Association in New Orleans; April 6, 1994. She consequently wrote a paper titled, "How Will National Curriculum Standards be Assessed at the Local Level?". In this paper, Perlman suggests that good public relations will assist local school corporations in understanding the needs for national curriculum standards. "In this era of site-based management and local empowerment, many view the imposition of state standards, let alone national ones as paradoxical at best and repugnant at worst, especially in light of how little funding comes from the federal government. Although that kind of thinking is based on misconceptions about the national [curriculum] standards, those feelings must be addressed." (Perlman, 1994)

I would submit that Perlman's suggestion, regarding the use of public relations to inform various publics of the need for national curriculum standards and to address those misconceptions that arise, could be extrapolated into utilizing effective public relations as the norm for developing, approving, and assessing local curriculums. As such, the remainder of this paper will focus on tactics that will best utilize both internal and external publics to establish, implement, and evaluate successful curriculums.

## Establishing Curriculums through Effective Public Relations

In a curriculum development model that utilizes a strong public relations approach, it is imperative that there be strong leadership. Research conducted over the past five years regarding what makes an effective school, concludes that:

Leadership is earned and it is created by followers. It cannot be imposed. Leadership is inherent in what a person does, not what position he/she holds. (Thompson, 1996) The importance of one person being responsible for the actual initiation of action can not be understated. Patrick Jackson (1986) states in a National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) bulletin that "the rubber meets the road at each individual school, where the principal is directly responsible for the [implementation of all public relations] tactics."

With a strong facilitator clearly identified, the task of formulating a curriculum committee is undertaken. In their book, Curriculum Development, Jon Wiles and Joseph Bondi (1989) acknowledge the cooperative endeavor of curriculum development. "It [the curriculum committee] has to involve many groups, agencies, and individuals from both the school and community. The teacher, who must carry out the curriculum, will largely determine the success of any curriculum change. The recipients of the curriculum, students, must be a part of the process of curriculum development. Parents and members of the community who must support curriculum change should be involved in curriculum development work from the very start."

Dr. Jay Thompson of Ball State University encourages graduate students, in his Curriculum Development course, to consider the planning of a curriculum committee two years prior to the actual consideration of text book adoption. In a state such as Indiana, textbook adoptions for a specific subject area occur every seven years. With a seven year model, Dr. Thompson explains that solid curriculum planning should begin with the formation of a committee and a thorough review of current research regarding the specific subject area that is being reviewed for textbook adoption. Subsequently, the next year prior to actual textbook adoption should be dedicated to completing a needs assessment and establishing exit goals; as

well as, beginning the work of completing topic comparisons, concept development traces, and vertical traces of prospective student textbooks submitted to the school corporation by the various publishing companies.

Connie Muther (1988) explains the difference between topic comparisons, concept development traces, and vertical traces: (a) A topic comparison is "a textbook evaluation strategy which scientifically compares the exact same textbook element (topic, skill, table of contents, glossary....) in all textbook submissions. (b) A concept development trace is "a textbook evaluation strategy which isolates the same concept, skill or topic in all textbook submissions, and determines if the test, or question in the text actually measure what the instruction, content, or practice present. (c) A vertical trace is "an evaluation strategy which determines how a skill, topic, strand, concept is vertically developed through a textbook series. By utilizing these three generic evaluation techniques; curriculum committees, comprised of both professionals, paraprofessionals, and non-professionals; can work efficiently and expediently to eliminate prospective choices that do not fall into alignment with the assessed needs and proposed exit goals that the curriculum committee has developed during the previous year.

During the actual year of adoption, proposed materials should be field tested and exposed to a thorough professional review by the teachers within the school corporation. The curriculum committee should communicate frequently with those educators field testing materials to ascertain that the materials are meeting the assessed needs and exit goals that have been established. Actual classroom observations would allow the committee to view firsthand that the proposed curriculum reflects student choice, holds the interest of the student, and promotes student achievement.

Throughout the adoption process, clear communication with both external

and internal publics is imperative. It is essential that curriculum committees refrain from the appearance of secrecy. The committee must also work together to promote a sense of openness, allowing ideological differences regarding the direction of curriculum reform. Often times, curriculum development becomes stymied by an esoteric attitude on the part of educational professionals as to "knowing what is best" for students, and thus parents and other community members feel alienated from the curriculum development process. This is a prime example of why strong leadership from the administrator responsible for facilitating the work of the curriculum committee is so important. It is also the direct responsibility of this individual to keep all publics aware of the committees progress through various written communications, public forums, and direct contact with key communicators from within the community.

The culmination of the committees work is cultivated into a final report that reflects the data gathering phases of the curriculum development process. "The report has to provide a succinct analysis of the actual curriculum and recommend steps to insure students receive balanced instruction. The final report must also reaffirm the worth of the proposed curriculum to board members, central and building administrators, teachers, parents, and community members." (Weinstein, 1986) Once approved and adopted by the school corporation, the utilization of public relations tactics do not cease, but rather assists the curriculum through the implementation process.

## Implementing Curriculums through Effective Public Relations

With the actual implementation of an approved curriculum program, complete with new student texts, comes a shift in responsibilities for the curriculum committee. The committee must now be responsible for monitoring the program. Again, the role of the administrator who facilitates the committee's work can not be

understated. This individual must now work to meet with parent action committees, special interest groups, and other concerned citizens to dispel the myths and misconceptions that are commonly associated with a change in curriculum. An aggressive campaign to inform external publics of the new curriculum can prove to be very beneficial. Public forums, how-to clinics, and written periodicals can all serve to facilitate a smooth transition of new materials that are reflective of current research and educational trends.

The National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA, 1986) published a manual for school corporations in 1986 titled, 101 PR Ideas You Can Use Now and More!. This manual gives a number of excellent and practical examples of how public relations tactics can be utilized to promote existing curriculums, as well as, effectively promote new curriculum approaches. Some of these tactics include utilizing cable access television to communicate with the community, the development of a parent's report card, making presentations to key communicators within the community, and utilizing technologies such as the World Wide Web for posting curriculum information on the Internet that could be accessed by anyone in the community via a personal computer. The common theme throughout the manual published by the NSPRA is to be proactive. A number of problems can be avoided by the timely dissemination of information through a variety of mediums, paving the way for successful curriculum implementations.

## Conclusion

While many schools are currently evaluating their need to develop public relations policy, the strategic need for utilizing standard public relations tactics for developing, approving, and implementing curriculums is already present. Hopefully, this paper has provided a justification for pursuing the integration of effective public relations with the process of curriculum development. As the

demand for accountability, the demand for more parental choice into the decision making of schools, the mandates of national, state, and local standards continue; it will become increasingly important that school administrators are able to utilize a variety of tactics to successfully facilitate the process of curriculum development.

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